

SEXUAL DISCOURSE AND THE PROBLEM OF MODERNITY

The Church's Conversations on Sexual Morality

Theological discourse does not move in a straight line in the historical life of the Church. What moves a topic, issue, or problem to the center of the Church's collective mind at any given time is hard to measure. Such motivating forces can range from new and critical concerns about the meaning and practice of faith in contemporary life to accommodations of the latest intellectual and cultural trends. As I noted in the Introduction, in recent years I have become interested in the increase in the extent and volume of the Church's theological debates on sexuality in general and sexual morality in particular. Though this discussion has been marked by anxiety-ridden repression and ideological distortion, its movement to the center of the present conversation of Christian denominations is not without constructive prospect.

Anxiety, in both individuals and institutions, often signals a serious concern that something is missing: ordinary connections within the course of our lives and with surrounding and informing events are not being made. Consequently, anxiety can often be an opportunity for new discovery and insight. The Church's anxiety about the state of the modern discourse on sexual morality and about the state of its own teaching can be an opportunity for further reflection and investigation—a new search for meaning and a renewal of rational theological and moral speech that can, in principle, say something substantively new. Even though what is missing in the Church's debates undoubtedly has many dimensions, a significant missing dimension is a new and more adequate engagement of modernity in rational theological argument, particularly in ethics. The Church's problems with articulating an adequate sexual morality are symptomatic of its deeper problems with rational conversation in the modern world in general. Relating the Church's conversations on sexual morality to its situation in modernity can provide further explanation for its present deep-seated institutional

anxiety about sex. It is for this reason that I have framed this examination of Christian sexual morality in the wider frame of the Church's conversation with the modern world. Removing the analyses of moral issues from their proper historical context has always led to ideological distortion. Practical moral reasoning is practiced critically only in the self-conscious reflections of history and culture. And few human phenomena are more deeply embedded in the psyches of individuals, cultures, and institutions than sex.

Since the Church generally understands sexuality and sexual morality to pertain to the fundamental exercise of Christian character, sex will always be a significant concern. However, neither this deep concern nor any perceived crisis in the present state of sexual morality are sufficient explanations for the distortions and ineffectiveness of the Church's present debates. The legitimate concern the Church must express for the state of sexual morality in the modern age cannot be adequately exercised unless attention is paid to the deeper cosmological roots of the Church's anxiety and problem. Challenges to the moral life wrought by the modern age are in many ways unprecedented in the Church's historical life. This does not mean that the Church lacks resources to respond to such problems; it does mean that such responses must be vital—must, in fact, engage the challenges of theological and moral debates at the level of their present occurrence. Unless the Church's deeper problems with the modern world are engaged self-consciously and critically, the cycle of innervating and ineffective anxiety about sex will continue.

Part One of this book concentrates on the form of the Church's current conversations on sexual morality as indicative of its problems with the historicity of theological and moral discourse and the historicity of its own life. Radical historicism and the challenges of pluralism, relativism, and conventionalism in theology and ethics are the Church's major problems with modernity and constitute *the problem of modernity* in general. The notation of "the problem of modernity" is not unique to the rhetoric of the Church, but cuts across all claims of the failure of reasoned discourse and critical argument at the end of the modern era and to a large extent accounts for the rise of the rhetoric of *postmodernity*.

The Problem of Modernity

Cosmology and the Moral Life

The term modernity itself suggests the results of a critical hermeneutic exercise in the discrimination of worldviews. To discriminate a worldview is to suggest that periods of historical time—most often long

periods—can be understood according to fundamental assumptions about how humans understand themselves in the entire expanse of the cosmos. To feel and understand ourselves as participants in larger and ordered locations of time and space is to see and interpret the universe as “cosmos” in the first place—a place of human location and presence, a universal world-frame for identifying ourselves as characters in a larger whole.¹

I shall use the term “cosmology” in a broader and deeper sense than simply a systematic theory about the universe and our place in it, though eventually cosmology also performs such a task. Related to my use of the term are notions of the metatheoretic and preconceptual. In *The Critique of Pure Modernity* (1988), David Kolb offers a good summary of Martin Heidegger’s description of “preconceptual understanding” and its implications for the grounding and orienting of worldviews. Kolb describes Heidegger’s attack on “the supposition that concepts and propositions are the only way to structure an encounter with the world.” On the contrary, “propositions select and make explicit meaning that is already lived with in another way.” Therefore, “significance is found in the world in which we are always already involved” (pp. 131–32).

Understanding the role of the preconceptual introduces a point that has some importance throughout my argument. No intellect or conscience, no single event or grand discovery ever “makes” a cosmological world. However, neither are cosmologies simply forced upon us by some fate. Kolb goes on: “The world, as a texture of significance and possibilities, needs us as the ‘place’ where it ‘happens’”—i.e., cosmologies are accomplishments of human imagination, interpretation, and understanding. “On the other hand, it is the world as a field of possibilities that solicits our projects and shapes lived time” (1988: 134).²

Such a preconceptual and existential dialectic between ourselves and our worlds makes cosmological discriminations very difficult. Still, such discriminations are essential works of historical study and an adequate historical consciousness. Without them, we fail to understand how we have come to think, speak, and act in certain ways and not others, and whether we have the permission, so to speak, to do any differently. The fact that history has at least phenomenological priority over the self insofar as it precedes and comes after us indicates that “our texture of possibilities is limited” (Kolb, 1988: 136). Since self-conscious historicity marks any cosmologically reflective theology and ethics in the modern age, no appeal to an ahistorical or transtemporal divine and/or metaphysical revelation of truth and right will overcome our informing dialectic of historical limit and possibility. Moral understanding and argument, and the limits and possibilities of character identification, are

inevitably informed by our age. It has been a continuing problem of the Church in the modern age to understand how modernity's turn to radical historicism can be an adequate frame for faithful theological teaching and moral guidance.³

Seeing reality, then, as part of a relatively ordered whole, or cosmos, is itself an exercise of human interpretation grounded in prior and preconceptual experiences of time and place, location and presence. Arising then from preconceptual foundations, cosmologies orient reason and action and effect the rational frameworks upon which we weave our systematic theories about the nature of the world and our own human nature and moral character. It would be useless to try to determine precisely any narrow order of causal sequence in the fall of old cosmologies and the rise of new ones. The framework that sets a worldview occurs not from any one interpretation, theory, or event but from the entire fabric of factors that creates a paradigmatic set of assumptions about life in the world. When these assumptions no longer perform the work of cosmological ordering and location, no longer answer our necessary and practical questions of everyday life, or fail even to ask questions relevant to that life, a change occurs. Such changes are gradual and embedded in the dynamics of any particular cosmological world view from its onset. What sometimes looks like a world-changing event or complex of events is only the most proximate occasion for becoming aware of a new identification.

To speak self-consciously of the collapse of old cosmological frames is to understand the radical relativity of time and place, of rational discourse itself, and of our general quests for meaning and character identification. Such speech is a characteristic mark of the radical historicist turn in human experience emerging at the advent of modernity. A modern historicist self-understanding expects all informing cosmological worlds to have temporal duration. I am not speaking here only of particular epochs in history but of fundamental views, understandings, and feelings for and about time and place—fundamental experiences of human location and presence which, along with many other functions, ground the meaning and experience of moral character and its obligations. To talk then of modernity as a cosmological experience and view of the world is to suggest that with the birth of modernity something fundamentally new emerged to the surface of thought in western history—new articulations of human location in the universe, new experiences of time and place along with new self-understandings of moral obligation and character. This is likewise to suggest that the cosmological age of modernity has duration and may be coming to an end.

Therefore, any attempt to reflect ethically on the contemporary dilemmas of the moral life cannot avoid cosmological implication. Our challenge, and indeed obligation, pertains to the level of our critical self-consciousness. Such self-consciousness is especially necessary for a Church that is attempting to live faithfully and responsibly within a tradition spanning more than one cosmological world. To say that the character of human nature in general, and Christian character in particular, has remained exactly the same with only formal contextual differences over the expanse of history is to make a fundamental mistake. To appreciate adequately the historicity of moral character, we cannot argue that contemporary understandings of "human nature" are either essentially continuous or now largely discontinuous with the moral wisdom of the past. Cosmological and historical growth, development, and change are marked by both continuity and discontinuity. Any either/or thinking here misses the fundamental nature of the interrelation of history, ethics, and the moral life.⁴

To speak of *nature and human nature*, as has been done traditionally in ethics, is first to suggest an experience of ordered human location—of time, place, and presence—through self- and other-consciousness and the experience of intersubjective interaction. Such location and presence set the ground for the occurrence of character as the axis of the moral life. The term "nature," with or without metaphysical underpinnings, thus becomes a way of speaking about human experiences of participation and dwelling in a cosmos.⁵ As we experience ourselves as being in a cosmos, we experience a relatedness and bonding with the physical world and with each other. It is from these experiences of relatedness and bonding that moral character and its ties of obligation ensue. We are now participants and moral actors on a cosmological stage and in an historical world-drama. The shape of the world-play and our part in it is intimately related to the cosmology that undergirds us with all of its cultural discriminations. Cosmology and the moral life are thus mutually intertwined. Change in an extant cosmology or world view will inevitably result in changes in our experience of ethical character and moral obligation—changes in our moral *persona*.

Nor do the challenges of understanding ourselves in historical place and time become obviated by any appeals to a supra-historical revelation. The revelations of biblical faith are fundamentally and contextually bound to place and time—to the temporal and historically embodied location and presence of God with us. Faith confessions and theological articulations are themselves finite and temporal, bounded by the cosmological views that frame them and to which they contribute.

Given the anxiety, even terror, we experience as finite beings, our longing for supra-temporal doctrinal and moral truths is understandable and probably unavoidable. However, it is not the way of a deeper biblical faith that suggests, within all the vagaries of time and place and the discontinuity and continuity of historical time and cosmological change, a more foundational certitude that the historically embodied presence of God remains with us amid the old and new, in both constancy and change (see Niebuhr, 1960).

There is a relativity here, but it is not relativism. Rather it is the universal “relatedness” of God to all that we experience at all times and places in the world—the critical relativity of a divine presence embodied amid any and all cosmologies. A Church that came to maturity in what we will call classical western cosmology cannot be limited to that cosmology for fidelity and responsibility.

Much of my approach in this book is undoubtedly motivated by a self-conscious intention to remain modern as long as I can.⁶ While remaining cognizant of the so-called postmodernity theses, many of the cues and characteristics of modernity will remain present in this work: historicity, relativity, plurality, and conventionality, all couched within a certain faith that a responsible measure of truth and right can be relatively grasped by individuals and groups in any cosmological world through rational interpretation, discourse, and reflection. None of this, however, means that I will either accept all of the common self-understanding of modernity or reject all of what the past offers as wisdom to the modern world. In the classical cosmology that frames most of the Church’s history we will find both wisdom and foolishness. Much of the Church’s present problem with modernity, particularly in the discourse on sexual morality, concerns the challenge to see ourselves differently than in times past and is a residue of a classical problem. Indeed it was part of the classical view of history that continuity was always assumed and discontinuity always problematic. In many ways, the modern view of history has reversed that assumption.⁷ Still, along with some formal continuity of the classical faith in rational theological and moral discourse, I will also stress a certain substantive continuity in modernity of the Church’s classical norm of marriage.

Now in what many think of as late and moribund modernity, the Church is being pressed on all sides. In not being modern enough—in not engaging its own age—the Church is criticized for being archaic, anachronistic, and thus both inadequately faithful and ineffective in its moral teaching on sexuality. In being too modern, the Church is criticized for being equally unfaithful to its ancient and informing heritage,

of becoming only another popularizer and morally rationalizing the statistical norms of the day. In a third and more overarching criticism, objections are raised when the Church continues to envision itself as a moral teacher and guide for culture and society at large, uncritically accepting a modern revision of classical notions of the value of rational and public moral argument that the end of the modern age has now supposedly disclosed as moribund. Here the growing rhetoric of post-modernity arises to question the substantive work of historically ordered reason in general. Amid all of these criticisms, the age of modernity, just as any self-consciously modern church, must now engage in a new defense of itself as a cosmological world that has now become a problem.

Certainly, to speak of modernity as a "problem" is somewhat paradoxical, since it is impossible to stand completely outside of an extant cosmological worldview in order to engage in its own analytic critique. Still, the term has some use in framing the difficulties modernity presents in ethical interpretation, analysis, and moral judgment from both a classical and postmodernist perspective. This is especially so if in fact we are now beginning to experience a transitional phase from modernity to what we can at present only euphemistically call post-modernity. While I will discuss certain aspects of the postmodernist perspective that are beginning to subtly influence the Church's teaching and guidance with respect to sexual morality, the Church's major problems in the mainline denominations still concern residues of the conflict between the classical and modern ages.

This does not mean that a full engagement of postmodern criticisms of modernity can be postponed much longer. However, for the Church to fully engage the rhetoric of postmodernity and to understand itself when it too speaks in a postmodern vein, it must first come to terms with the remainders of its problem with modernity. More particularly, the Church must become a fully critical participant in the *modern* discourse on sexual morality. It is important to understand that cosmological worlds are never skipped. If we are now in a time toward the end of modernity and poised on the brink of postmodernity, no benefit will accrue to the Church if we slide relatively unnoticed from what has been considered classical moral wisdom to a time that suggests major deconstruction in the ordered processes of reason and the identity of moral character itself. It is time for the Church to take modernity more seriously and constructively in its moral rhetoric of sex.

We will not like everything we find in modernity and its moral discourse; but the Church cannot hope to advance into whatever new cosmological worlds await unless it first has passed fully and self-

consciously through the world in which it still, however marginally, finds itself. To fight only rear guard actions against the extant age is to rob the Church of its own part in world-making leadership, with the denominations ending up as teachers that are behind rather than leading those who are asking for guidance. In being a full participant in the critique and self-understanding of the age, we may at the same time find new possibilities for effective teaching and moral guidance. This is all the more necessary now, since in its depictions of the crisis of the so-called end of modernity, postmodernist rhetoric generally fails to meet the challenge of offering any substantive and practical moral guidance for life in the putatively new age.⁸ In finally coming to terms with modernity, the Church will be better prepared for constructive leadership in whatever further cosmological worlds history has to offer. Therefore, upon the horizon of late modernity and in light of a possible contemporary period of transition to other and future ages, an historical location of the Church's present position in the current debates on sex must begin with a discussion of the major contours of the rhetoric of morality in classical western cosmology and its transition to modernity.

Classical Cosmology and the Rhetoric of Nature

In *The Idea of Nature*, R. G. Collingwood understands the classical Greek view of nature, or *physis*, as belonging to the internal and identifying reality of a thing "which is the source of its behavior" (1972: 44). F. E. Peters continues in the same vein describing the classical view of nature as an internal organizational principle that accounts for the growth process or genesis of a thing—its directional motion that guides it toward certain ends, and in later developments, purposes (1967: 158). By the time of Heraclitus, Peters argues, the Greek world had extended the idea of order from the intelligent motion of nature to the *kosmos* itself under the notion of *nomos*, or law, denoted as divine (*theios*) (1967: 108). Collingwood describes the Greek view of intelligent nature as a vital motion under the guidance of a mind or soul. It was not just ceaseless and random motion that the Greeks saw in the cosmos, or only motion that obeyed mechanistic laws, but a type of character that was "not only alive but intelligent" (1972: 3; 3–4). Thus the cosmos operated under a providence that held the secrets of the true, the right, and the good. Human character could be deflected from such purposes as could the universe; but such deflections were only temporary disorders and could be remedied by returning to the providentially ordered course. Natural tragedies, often radical in their effects, were seen similarly as more disorder than chaos. Moral tragedy was classically interpreted as the

result of failures of knowledge and will, sometimes among the gods, but most often in humans. However, the negative consequences of such failures could be integrated through psychodramatic catharsis and moral instruction for the advancement of character.

Upon this experience and understanding of nature, classical ethics was shaped by a sense of ordered motion having a direction and purpose for the integration of the cosmos and human character. Greek philosophy grounded our western understanding of both the cosmos and of human nature in terms of character internally and externally directed by law, all within or under the providence of nature/divinity. Grounded by a variety of metaphysical discriminations, ethical interpretation and moral argument were archaeological expeditions to discover the values, virtues, and goods embedded in the cosmos. Even though there remained a plurality of such expeditions, it was endemic to the classical view that, despite all the irregularities and disorders apparent in the life of human beings, there was a natural and cosmological foundation for the true, the right, and the good. What was of nature and nature's law was good and right. To counter the disclosures of nature's order was to go astray. There was an intelligence and a will to the cosmos—a character. Guided by the biblical God, other gods, or by its own internal and organic dynamic, nature was a motherly intellectual and moral guide.

Collingwood suggests that the Greeks experienced an analogy between individual human beings and the world of nature. "The world of nature as a whole is then explained as a macrocosm analogous to this microcosm" (1972: 8). Such a classical moral cosmos had a double character of individuality and universality. Once the analogy was set, the moral life of an individual and society was obliged by the intelligent natural life of the universe, all brought together as a unity of character. A change in one denoted a change in the other. Ethics and the moral life were grounded in far more than individual taste or cultural and social convention. The stakes of a life of virtue were cosmological in weight and proportion. Within this sense of the whole, there was plurality but not pluralism of any modern variety. What classical cosmology held most dear was a sense of unity and foundational order that could *contain* the pluralities, irregularities, disorders, and vicissitudes of life. To bear these burdens and meet these challenges were no more than the obligations of character and the pursuit of wisdom provided for by the nature of reality divinely and metaphysically upheld.

I have concentrated, however briefly and in broad strokes, on the Greek origination of the classical cosmological vision of the world and

the moral rhetoric of nature that it informed. Certainly this rhetoric was developed especially in Roman Stoic thought and later in Medieval understandings of natural law. However, by and large, such foundations for the relationship of cosmos, character, and morality were set by the Greeks and relatively sustained from the beginning of the Christian era until the sixteenth century in Western culture. These classical philosophical underpinnings framed the major contours for the foundation of the Christian tradition of sexual morality even when supernaturalistic norms were added to the Greek rhetoric of nature such as in the celebration of consecrated virginity and dedicated celibacy in the early Church.⁹

Even while concentrating on these philosophical foundations, we cannot leave out consideration of the Christian scriptures when speaking about these matters. The Bible also remains foundational for the Church's moral teachings even though its treatment of specific issues and rules of sexual behavior cannot be considered thematic. Still, it was not a unique biblical cosmology that grounded the rise of the classical Christian tradition in sexual ethics. Rather in the main, the Church historically produced its teachings on sexual morality from classical cosmological recipes, with biblical texts and references often sprinkled like pepper in an ethical stock distilled from essentially non-biblical sources. The high point of the classical tradition of Christian sexual ethics was undoubtedly the Catholic Middle Ages. And it is tempting to think that things changed radically in the Renaissance with the Protestant Reformation and its new turn to scripture and the priority of the individual believer. And yet, as I will argue, the present state of the debate across all denominations seems to indicate a relatively unusual attempt to remain continuous with the major contours and intuitions of the classical tradition of ongoing natural order in sexual morality, even when the overt arguments given are not of the classical natural law variety. It is often suggested that classical Greco-Roman cosmologies expressed radically different views of the world than the Biblical-Hebraic. Though I think such distinctions are often too sharply drawn,¹⁰ my point here is only to suggest that by the time of the patristic age, the major contours of biblical and classical worldviews had become intertwined.

No major cosmological shifts in worldviews were required in the establishment of the classical traditions of Christian sexual ethics. As James Brundage argues in his comprehensive *Law, Sex and Society in Medieval Europe*, "Many sexual beliefs and attitudes common in medieval Europe were Christian by adoption, not by origin" (1987: 2). The basic contours of such an adoption were in place by the patristic age. "Detailed treatments of ideas about sex and a well-developed rationale

to support them did not appear in Christian literature until the fourth and fifth centuries of the patristic age"—i.e., in the generation of Jerome and Augustine (1987: 2). Thus, the classical Christian tradition of systematic theological and moral argument concerning sexual morality is a product of the patristic, not the biblical age. Nor was any putatively unique biblical cosmology foundational for these arguments. Brundage suggests that the arguments of the patristic writers were in one sense both original and derivative, drawing from the understandings of their time, as well as an original recombination of ancient notions, both philosophical and religious.

What was original in patristic sexual morality was its singular mixture of Stoic ethical ideas with ancient religious beliefs about ritual purity, supported by a theological rationale based in large part on the Hebrew scriptures. Christian sexual morality is a complex assemblage of pagan and Jewish purity regulations, linked with primitive beliefs about the relationship between sex and the holy, joined to Stoic teachings about sexual ethics, and bound together by a patchwork of doctrinal theories largely invented in the fourth and fifth centuries (1987: 3).

"Invented" may be an unfairly pejorative word here even though it is beyond doubt that classical theological doctrines were critically constructed within extant cosmological environments and cannot be drawn simply from distilled biblical texts. This, of course, does not mean that non-biblical resources make such doctrines and practices miscast or wrong. The point is that in the patristic age the cosmology of the classical secular world was finally not so foreign to the biblical "world-picture" to suggest a total corruption of Christian origins. This also does not obviate the historical and contemporary relevance of scriptural references to sexuality and sexual conduct. The entire range of biblical texts, from prohibitions of sexual behavior in specific contexts to more universal images, values, and norms can and must be part of any faithful attempt at reconstructing a contemporary and theologically grounded sexual ethic. Still, it is clear that biblical sources do not contain sustained *moral arguments* about sexuality and sexual conduct. When such systematic arguments were forthcoming in the later Church, they were built largely upon the cosmological framework of the classical Greco-Roman world.¹¹

Two important contemporary implications can be gathered from this analysis. First, what is not contained in the biblical sources cannot be imported surreptitiously or uncritically. The spate of biblical references

to sexual conduct, couched in either liberal or conservative exegesis, will not substitute for contemporary theological and moral argument. Even without the appellation of liberal or conservative, exegesis itself, though necessary, does not suffice for theological and moral argument. A broader hermeneutic is necessary that holds new and contemporary conversations with the biblical texts rather than stopping with exegetic reconstructions, however critical, of conversations in their original context. Second, if the major traditions of the Church's teaching on sexual morality—that is, systematic teaching as theological and moral argument—are woven upon the frame of classical cosmology, then the collapse of that cosmology will have major and foundational effects on that teaching.

The Transition to Modernity

As I have indicated, the suggestion that cosmological worlds collapse is neither histrionic nor moralistic. Worldviews do not end because they are ignorant or corrupt, nor do they explode violently without important and influential residue and remainder. Rather, cosmological worlds collapse gradually over time and for essentially pragmatic reasons.¹⁷ Since cosmologies are born as foundational environments for identifying ourselves as human characters and moral agents in a life-world, when they cease to accomplish these tasks they will wither and eventually die. Our perennial and continuous historical inquiries after meaning, truth, and right are not being satisfied in ways that can support an identifying cosmological environment. New questions are asked and old ones asked again in new ways. Particular historical events, discoveries, and theories may focus our attention on the transition from one worldview to another, but in themselves, they are not causative.

For example, it is commonly suggested—rather moralistically—that abuses in renaissance Catholicism caused the Protestant Reformation. However, any adequate historical description of such abuses sees them as *occasions* for rather than *causes* of reformation and thereby refocuses our attention on the deeper and more radical reasons for the historical shift. The Reformation, in its deeper historical sense, was far more than a mere reform in theological doctrine or moral action. The Reformation was, rather, both a participant in and beneficiary of a transitional period of cosmological change from classical to modern. Its origins were in a transitional period between cosmological worlds. Consequently, it would be just as much an error to expect that all in Protestantism even now expresses a theology and ethic built on the framework of pure

modernity as to expect that Roman Catholicism, in all of its theological reflection, is totally wedded to classical and medieval world views. After the Second Vatican Council, both Catholic and Protestant traditions have experienced curious recombinations of both classical and modern cosmologies in their debates about sexual morality, especially in the rhetoric of human nature and the search of both Bible and tradition for moral guidance. To speak, then, of the collapse of cosmologies does not mean that the residual dust of the past is not left in a contemporary age. Often such residue contains traces of continuous wisdom that can be recovered. Just as often, however, through a forced continuity of what is now discontinuous, such classical residue contributes to the confusion in the discourse of an age that must finally be engaged in its own place and time.

Collingwood dates the beginning of the critical age of transition to modernity with Copernicus (1473–1543). Collingwood is aware that this dating of the start of the transition to modernity in the sixteenth century can be confusing since its more common dating is with the rise of European humanism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet despite his apology for this departure from established usage, there is an important rationale involved. Because Collingwood sees the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to be still intertwined with Platonic and Aristotelian cosmologies of nature, they remain classical. In order to indicate the transitional status commonly attributed to the Renaissance, Collingwood uses the later dating when the classical cosmological view of nature began to shift. In this scheme, Collingwood dates the beginning of modernity with the rise of historicism in the eighteenth century as originating and defining of our contemporary life-world (Collingwood, 1972: 4–5).

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Copernicus' scientific discovery of a heliocentric cosmos challenged the classical analogy between the microcosm of human nature and the macrocosm of the nature of the known universe. The link of intelligent and willful character connecting human nature and the nature of the universe was broken. If the earth was not the center of the universe, then no intrinsic analogy could be made between the principal inhabiter of the earth—human being—and the universe itself. Thus, as Collingwood indicates, the beginning of the collapse of the classical view of nature starts with the change in the understanding of the cosmos as intelligent, exhibiting within itself an ordered rationality and directional will: in modernity "the movements which it exhibits, and which the physicist investigates, are imposed upon it from without." Consequently, the Greco-Roman view of human character, grounded in an intimate participation with an

analogous character of the cosmos, was challenged. "Instead of being an organism, the natural world is a machine: a machine in the literal and proper sense of the word, an arrangement of bodily parts designed and put together and set going for a definite purpose by an intelligent mind outside of itself" (Collingwood, 1972: 5).

Copernicus, Galileo, and most scientists up to and including Newton saw no major incongruity between a mechanistic view of the universe and biblical faith in God as the intelligent maker and source of all order. As Collingwood argues, an analogy remained, but in a different arrangement. The mechanism of the universe was cast into a new analogical relation with human character. God, as the intelligent creator of order out of chaos, used the machine of the universe for moral purposes: "Everyone understood the nature of a machine.... As a clock-maker or millwright is to a clock or mill, so is God to Nature" (1972: 9). Human nature and moral agency were now to act in cooperation with the Creator in relation to an inorganic physical nature and cosmos.

However, analogies have a way of extending themselves beyond what is intended in their original use. Given life by either reason, God, or both, the intimacy of the classical analogy between humans and cosmos was substituted for a more disjunctive and less vital analogy of creation as forming and making inanimate objects for functional use. Thus both God and by extension human beings, as creators and fabricators of the universe were cast upon a lonelier more inanimate natural stage. The body of the cosmos—and later "body" in general—was separated from its creating and fabricating intelligence and mind. In the Renaissance, the cosmological stage was set for overturning the classical rhetoric of nature as an intelligent organism that contained the secrets of the true, the right, and the good as well as a stable divine depository for those secrets available for discovery by the graced human intellect.

In classical Christian cosmology, intellectual and moral character had been cast as a quest for life-wisdom deposited by God in the cosmos, which, in turn, provided clues for its discovery. Now with the relative breach between the new more mechanistic cosmos and human beings, moral character became equated with an individual agent-intellect and will. Divine and human character were now understood as maker/operators in a natural world extrinsic to them, but which they inhabited. A new mode of participation and dwelling began to emerge—a new sense of moral participation and obligation oriented around the individual moral actor. Experiences of creativity in the Renaissance were routinized under notions of artisan and artistic genius. The modern turn to the individual person and the individual conscience as autonomous and sepa-

rated from nature had begun. Conscience came to be understood under a model of super-agency. The moral agent as maker, under the power of a creative conscience, could create and direct the affairs of nature and cosmos.

With the coming of the Reformation, the classical analogical and organically rational bridge that connected God, humanity, and cosmos gave way to a new biblical revelational bridge between God and the individual soul. The relatively sociological/structural cast of the Medieval world gave way to a more internal psychological one. In cosmological perspective, the creative virtuosity of the Renaissance artisan/artist was not totally foreign to the genius of internal confessions of faith of the reformers. Both highlighted the individual. Both were concerned with creating order and function in a relatively alien, sinful, and chaotic world. The challenge for Christian faith and life in this burgeoning cosmology would be to maintain this internal analogy of faith between God and the individual person now that the more organic and extrinsic analogies of nature and being were collapsing.

In the preceding I have stressed certain themes of a renaissance and early modern view of nature that were finally taken up and given new significance in the full birth of modernity in the eighteenth-century enlightenment. It ought to be recalled that any transitional period will contain great admixtures of the new and the old. For example, the same need and quest for order and regularity can be noted in this period as in the classical worldviews. If the nature of the physical and human cosmos could no longer display the ordered regularity and harmony of organic union, then to keep disorder and now chaos at bay required a new dependence on the orderliness of the divinely created human intellect and conscience and the regularity of the word of God spoken in the Bible and heard in the confidence of the moment of faith. If metaphysically grounded philosophical and theological speculation were no longer dependable, certainly one could cast one's cosmological lot with the providence of empirical science, the creative arts, and the evidence of the faith of goodly and godly people. As we have seen, the image of God was now expressed more in the creative genius of the human maker who *fabricated* the order of both nature and society, than in the speculations of metaphysicians or the incantations of mystagogic liturgies.

However, if God was, in the main, only extrinsically connected to the cosmos as its origin and first maker, eventually science rather than revealed religion would determine nature's laws whether first established by God or not. In this way, rationalistic deism presented a profound challenge to traditional religion. The intimate connection between

faith and reason promoted in classical Christian cosmology would become more disjunctive, with a new and more radical combat emerging in what had previously been considered an organic and sacramental whole. In this transitional period, the seeds were sown for the later modern warfare between reason and revelation often polarized by both secular and religious positivism. In this polarization, either science and its method would claim all certainty of knowledge or religion would attempt to become more "scientific" and biblically and dogmatically positivistic in both theology and ethics. Even when the initial anxiety over the transition to the new age was overcome in new and critically modern interpretations of reason and revelation, and in the development of new critical-historical methods of biblical and doctrinal interpretation, the residue of religious, theological, and ethical positivism has been most long-standing in sexual ethics. Anxiety over the coming of modernity was exponentially increased by a renewed anxiety over sexual matters as another powerful energy and force of nature to be mastered by mind and spirit.

The Renaissance, as any transitional age, is a confusing period for cosmological discrimination. Any depiction of a trace of modernity can be countered with an equal trace of the classical world. Nonetheless, it was the Renaissance that set the stage for a cosmological shift from a moral rhetoric of organic nature to the rhetoric of individual genius and conscience whose challenge it was to *impose* order on the growing experience of historical relativity, plurality, and conventionality that would mark the modern age.

Historicist Modernity

Collingwood argues that the cosmology of modernity draws something from the classical and renaissance worldviews but differs in fundamental ways. By the eighteenth century, both organic and mechanistic analogies between the human microcosm and the cosmological macrocosm of nature gave way to the "analogy between the processes of the natural world as studied by natural scientists and the vicissitudes of human affairs as studied by historians" (1972: 9). The common demarcations of modernity as an age of relativity, plurality, and conventionality, of the boldly thinking individual, of science, technology, and finally, of an increasingly impersonal technocracy, while accurate enough, are finally encompassed and ordered in modernity's overarching historicist self-understanding. By concentrating on the studies of eighteenth-century historians, Collingwood noticed a new foundational theme for the age—a new way of dealing with "the very ancient dualism between changing and unchanging elements in the world of nature" (1972: 10).

Against the classical age, the historians argued that what had seemed unchanging in ages past was subject to change—had in fact changed (Collingwood, 1972: 10). Thus the rhetoric of historicism marked a new and more radical temperament and ushered the birth of cosmological modernity. If history and its progress also meant that fundamental and structural changes could occur in the nature of reality, then, as disclosed in the transitional Renaissance, it would seem that individuals and their reason and science—their technological control and political and moral ordering—could become the new dependability. Against this renaissance and later romanticist view, however, eighteenth-century historical study began to show that the inorganic mechanism of nature was not as manipulable as first imagined and that human intellectual, artistic, and moral genius could not in itself avoid the terrors and vicissitudes of history. No matter which analogy was used to address the wide breadth of cosmological self-understanding, being and nature were thoroughly involved with history and disclosed neither a clear and constant voice of motherly moral guidance nor an infinitely manipulable mechanism that could be directed toward clear moral purposes.

There were radical implications embedded in modernity's historicist turn even at the birth of our age. As I have argued, both the classical and renaissance worldviews bound the character of both nature and the self to a continuous experience of regularity amid the surface irregularities of life. In Christian traditions, all areas of life, including morality, had always demanded some sort of assurance that continuity in the universe could be guaranteed either through a divine deposit in nature or through the regularities of a creative intellect and conscientious will formed in and by faith. What was new was simply what had been there all along waiting to be discovered or fabricated from the given stuff of God-given nature: what seemed like radical change, even in the very fabric of nature and the cosmos was finally only an appearance. Even the reformers had argued that their reformation only seemed like a radical break from the authentic, biblical, and classical faith and that the Renaissance Catholic Church itself existed under only the appearance of fidelity. In the view of the majority of renaissance reformers, the Reformation was not a new strand of Christianity but only a recovery and re-creation of the ancient and constant identity. Protestantism was a faithful reformation rather than a radical revolution that would have been unfaithful in their minds. Catholics, of course, argued the contrary but on the same cosmological grounds. To some extent, in both classical and renaissance views what is older and closer to origins was in fact better, more authentic, and faithful. From a fully modern historicist perspective, this is the now archaic

genetic fallacy of origins, which suggests that all radical discontinuities with the past are by and large either appearances or corruptions and that fidelity demands a return to core origins. Geneticist residues have remained influential in the theological and moral discourse of all Christian denominations.

Geneticist Residues

Despite all claims that biblical and Christian understandings of history had overcome the ancient and mythic understandings of recurring cycles, Christianity retained something of the cyclic view, at least in the priority given to origins. In this way Christianity resisted the full implications of modernity's historicist turn and its radical critique of such priority. I am not talking about general and necessary attempts to understand the past and the origins of traditions. The geneticism that has been transmitted to the modern age in the theological discourse and moral rhetoric of the Church exhibits a significant trace of the Platonic and neo-Platonic notions of exit from a former place of greater clarity, authenticity, and purity along with a constant need and moral obligation of return. Thus we are called always to judge the present in terms of the past—indeed, often with arguments rooted in the past. Even the interpretation of a linear historical frame for biblical eschatology suggests an originating deposit in the ancient past that is an adequate template for future fulfillment even when new and more critical understandings seem necessary for present guidance. Thus in terms of doctrinal and moral development, we are now only understanding more of what has always been there in the originating deposit. The biblical and Christian “answer” remains, only the questions change. Historical interpretation and the norm of historical response in the Church thus retained ancient cyclic characteristics rather than gaining the more radically modern dialectical and dialogical character wherein all questions and answers mutually change, transform, and decenter each other, and in that, become new. It is clear that such understandings of historical time directly confronted the radical and “progressive” view of history that Collingwood argues marked modernity in the middle of the eighteenth century (1972: 13).¹³

In the shift from the classical cyclic to the progressive view of history, modernity was searching for a new form of dependability—a new way to handle the question of order and change. If historical time is a progress of change, both continuity and discontinuity are real. Change is not mere appearance or a false step or detour from an originating source. One could “depend on” change, and therefore the wisdom and

the burden of ethical interpretation and moral response must be shared and transmitted between and among the generations. Critical ethical and moral discourse about the values, virtues, and goods that frame individual and public character became an obligation of each generation. Modernity's historicism gave at least an implied permission that new conversations about the moral life could in principle say new things.

History as Progress in Modernity

Merely accepting a modern notion of progress over against the more ancient cyclic notions of historical return to past origins does not obviate the Church's problems with modernity. In fact, the character mark of progress in modernity is often suggested as a fundamental error of the age—a sign of the failure of the optimistic Enlightenment to account for the vicissitudes of time and history noted at the start of the age. In this sense the age has been failing since it can no longer account for itself to itself. With such a cosmological failure comes the rhetoric of the end of modernity. And indeed, if such progressive views of nature, cosmos, and history only mean the positive increase in knowledge and virtue within, as Johann Metz (1980) indicates, an "evolutionary optimism," this would indeed be so. This sort of evolutionism, taking hold most strongly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is often still the case in much of the contemporary self-understanding of modernity. Nor is this understanding of progress only an infection of secular modernity. The denominations of the Christian Church have not been immune from such theological/cultural optimism, even when we assume that we are only gaining deeper insights into the wisdom of our past. Certainly, from any number of sources, this sort of optimistic triumphalism is now being questioned.¹⁴

However, despite often trenchant critiques of modernity and the modern Church, questions remain for this genre of the Christian theological critique of Enlightenment modernity. Even if the Church's liaison with modernity has led to intellectual and spiritual failure, can we in fact simply remove ourselves from this cosmological body? Can cosmologies simply be exchanged without significant risks of naive illusion or retreat from all power and influence—a retreat often attended with self-congratulation at this self-styled purification of our faith? Or has the Church entered into only formal relations with modernity rather than now having been substantively changed by modernity in our own self-understanding? I have argued that we do far more than merely inhabit cosmological worlds, but rather are informed and identified by them. Even in Third World cultures, the substantive and identifying influence of modernity

has not been prevented or even postponed by some putative standard of original simplicity in faith and life. Finally, and most importantly, if the Church has been and will continue to be substantively transformed by its own cosmological age, are we so certain that what modernity often says of itself is all there is left to say about the modern world? In terms of the modern age, has our ecclesiastical and moral discourse entered too quickly into a new rhetoric of crisis and dilemma between fidelity and contemporaneity without engaging again in a full critique that sees new possibilities for faith and action along with the now predictable catalogue of cosmological failures? The rhetoric of crisis ought to be engaged carefully, especially where there is no discernible exit. In light of this, David Kolb states a useful strategy: "the refusal to take as final the categories of modernity's standard self-description" (1988: xi). To understand the modern progressive view of history, then, a deeper probe is required into the broader cosmological context of modernity.

First, it is necessary to understand the novelty of the change in the modern age's understanding and experience of historical time compared to the classic vision. I have argued that the modern world was born when the visions of the classical age no longer accounted for the experiences of contemporary life. New questions were not adequately addressed by old answers. If one could no longer depend on the past, then turning toward the future was understandable. As Ernest Gellner suggests, eighteenth-century Enlightenment modernity captured a new form of "World Story." The historical temper of the modern age was one of "upward sloping, and, on the whole self sufficient. Its salvation was endogenous" and the modern commitment to progress based on a "kind of intramundane destiny" (1978: 9; 3-4).

As Gellner notes, there was a certain charm in the promise of salvation in the new rather than in the retrieval of past origins. The growth of science, technology, and industry marked a period of unsurpassed progress in Western culture in comparison with past ages and other cultures. In the nineteenth century, Darwin's evolutionary biology was seen as a further verification of such progress. Along with these charms, an analogy of progressive and evolving destiny fit perfectly with the growth of middle-class culture: "The period of the belief in progress was also, notoriously, a bourgeois period" with middle-class life being "essentially a *career*" (Gellner, 1978: 13)—an equal mark of modernity's common self-understanding. Like the advancements of bourgeois life, history was now marked with a sense of growing experience and expertise. For philosophy and rationalist theology, "the problem of the relativity of belief and value is overcome.... Though values and ideas differ,